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ABSTRACT

Managers have an obvious interest in motivation, yet there are few connections between the needs of the manager and research on motivation theory and system building. Motivation can be defined as the degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified behaviors. This definition assumes that motivation is an individual phenomenon; that it is intentional; that it involves arousal, direction, and persistence; and that it is reflected in behavior. Motivation theories include arousal theories, which mostly revolve around the needs of people, and direction theories, which include goal-setting, expectancy theory, operant conditioning, and equity theory. However, this information is often difficult for managers to put into practice. It is difficult to individualize rewards in large organizations, and it is often difficult to observe people--another motivating factor. Many jobs are interdependent and rewards cannot easily be separated. In terms of management practice, most of the answers are still awaited. There are, however, two basic questions managers should ask themselves--is motivation important for performance? and can performance be defined in behavioral terms? If the answers to these questions are yes, and if other criteria are operant, then the strategies arising from motivation theory can be put into practice. (KC)

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MOTIVATION THEORIES AND MOTIVATION SYSTEMS

The Gulf Between Theory and Practice

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MOTIVATION THEORIES AND MOTIVATION SYSTEMS:
the gulf between Theory and Practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Managers have an obvious interest in motivation. Firstly they are generally themselves strongly motivated to achieve and perform in their own jobs. Secondly they are likely to be concerned with, and may define themselves as responsible for the performance of their subordinates. It is part of the folklore of management that employees left to their own devices will not perform either at their assumed potential or at a level considered adequate for the job. Managers commonly believe that it is part of their task to encourage employees to work more efficiently, and consequently they are concerned to discover what employee behaviour leads to greater efficiency and what means can be used to encourage such behaviour. If managers believe that individual employees choose how they are going to behave then a management task is to set up some kind of motivational system which will encourage the appropriate choices. How should they set about this? At this point we find a yawning gulf between the needs of the manager and the work of academics in research theory and system building. The two areas of discourse do not meet. This paper is looking for connections and synthesis between the two. It is particularly important to look for synthesis across the numerous research and theoretical studies of motivation, for in nearly all cases such studies are dedicated to the development or support of one theory or sub-theory only. There are very few studies which bring together for the benefit of the manager the disparate work from the whole field of motivational studies.

We can start with a definition of motivation formulated by Mitchell about which there would be general agreement.

"Motivation is the degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified behaviours". (Mitchell 1982). There are four points to make about this definition. Firstly it assumes that motivation is an individual phenomenon. It is something which incorporates the uniqueness of each performer.

Secondly motivation is described as intentional in that it is under the performer's control and results in actions he has chosen to do.

Thirdly motivation has more than one aspect: it involves arousal, direction and persistence. A person has to be activated in some way; having become activated, he has to choose a particular line of action; having chosen that direction, he chooses to maintain that behaviour for some period of time. We can study these aspects of motivation separately, and this division is well-reflected in the literature.

Fourthly motivation is reflected in behaviour. A behaviour is chosen and we can study it, but it is distinct from motivation itself. What motivational theories are trying to do is predict behaviour, or establish the connection between specific motivation and specific behaviour.

Although various writers have given different emphasis or qualifications to the above definition, it represents at its level of generality a consensus of thinking.

2. AROUSAL THEORIES

In this section we consider what statements can be made about theories of arousal that would receive general support. In the following section we will look at theories of choice in the same light, but we will not consider theories of persistence as so little work has been done in that area. What gets people going? That is the basic question we are trying to answer. The most popular theories for many years are those that emphasise needs - either single needs or groups of needs. They assume that people want certain things from their jobs and will work to fulfil these needs. Among some of the most influential formulations of motivational needs are those of Maslow, McClelland, Katz and Herzberg. Their schemes have formed part of management training for two generations or more. An expanded discussion on needs-based theories can be found in Coombe Lodge Information Bank Papers (Turner 1979 and Ferguson 1976). Such theories of arousal all have one major point: that different people are motivated by different things. Proponents of them have also argued that organisations by and large have overlooked upper level needs and concentrated on satisfying their employers lower level needs through motivational systems that emphasise financial reward and physical comfort. Their recommendation to managers is that more attention is given to the employee's need for recognition, autonomy, variety, creativity, etc.

There has recently been signs of a more critical approach to the needs-based school of thought. The point of attack is the assumption that needs are deep-seated within the individual going back to his early history or even his genetic inheritance. The need to achieve, for example, is seen as a long-held general characteristic of an employee's personality, and is not particularly dependent upon the specific situation he is experiencing. A number of motivation theorists are arguing that the individual takes a much more active role than that, particularly in observing at any particular time the immediate environment, and processing that information. Arousal comes from the specific social or task environment at a specific time, and the individual cognitively processes and evaluates the information available to him. One line of this approach has been based on theories of social facilitation and evaluation apprehension. Ferris, Beehr and Gilmore (1978) argue that people are aroused by the presence of others, and the knowledge that they are being evaluated by others. So they pick up and interpret the social cues in the form of expectations transmitted by subordinates, colleagues and supervisors.

Hackman and Oldham (1980) have attempted to relate the characteristics of the job to the current task needs of the individual. In their work on job enrichment they argue that an enriched job is only motivating for those who happen to have high needs for growth and want to satisfy that within this job. Korman (1976) has argued that arousal can derive from the individual experiencing cognitive discrepancy between his self-esteem and the situation he finds himself in. Thus the woman who sees herself as a natural leader or as a risk-taking trouble shooter

but who finds herself in a routine job at the beck and call of her boss will be aroused to change her situation to achieve greater cognitive consistency.

Schein in his work on the developmental psychology of adults has argued that each individual faces a series of constantly changing tasks both in his life cycle and his career cycle and he is aroused by whatever current developmental task faces him. (Schein 1978).

These writers, and indeed the whole of the Gestalt school of psychology have two things in common in their approach to arousal. They all lay emphasis on cognitive information processing, and they all lay emphasis on the immediate time-bound environment. (Salancik and Pfeffer 1977, 1978).

3. DIRECTION THEORIES

When people are aroused to act, why do they follow the direction they do? What is at the root of behavioural choice? There are four major theories in currency that attempt to answer this question: goal-setting, expectancy theory, operant conditioning, and equity theory.

1. Goal-Setting: The considerable amount of research on goal-setting is relatively unambiguous. Its general conclusions are that people work harder with goals than without them, particularly if the goals are specific and difficult, and if they receive proper feedback. (Yukl and Latham 1978)
2. Expectancy theory: (Mitchell 1980) and operant conditioning (Davis and Luthans 1980) can be treated together because though they are derived from very different philosophies they have very similar principles of application. The key points they make are that:-
 - (a) Rewards should be tied closely to behaviour
 - (b) The administration of rewards should be frequent and consistent
 - (c) People are motivated by past outcomes or expected outcomes.
3. Equity theory: is based on the belief that people are motivated by a desire for fairness. (Goodman 1977; Carrell and Ditttrich 1978). If they do not believe they are being treated fairly they will behave in a way that restores equity to the situation. If things are unfair, the research shows not unsurprisingly that over reward is treated much less seriously than under reward. Equity theory has strong conceptual connections to social exchange theory.

These four theories give us four separate mechanisms motivating behaviour - intentions to reach a goal, expectations of maximum pay-off, past reinforcement history, and a desire for fairness. However they all have this much in common, that motivation is an individual intentional process, and all except operant conditioning focus on relatively current information processing. Three of the

theories define motivation as directly influenced by outcomes, while goal setting indirectly influences it via goal level and intentions.

4. PROBLEMS FOR THE MANAGER

How much use is all of this to managers? There does seem to be some convergence at some points in the current theories of arousal and choice, and to some extent convergence between the two, but does that help the manager very much? There certainly are residual problems and we can list these firstly in relation to theories of arousal and then to theories of choice.

1. However admirable in theory, it is often difficult in practice to individualise rewards. The larger and more heterogeneous the organisation, the more difficult it becomes. Ideally, employees should have some choice in their compensation, and managers should have great flexibility in the administration of rewards. In reality however this is seldom the case, particularly when local and national agreements, or union bargaining are in evidence.
2. If we assume that evaluation apprehension is a key factor in arousal, then it follows that people need to be observed and management need to have some influence on social norms. If the situation is that people who observe an employee are his co-workers or subordinates, then it is really they who are critical to the appraisal process, and this would certainly make nonsense of most appraisal practices today.
3. In relation to the influencing of social norms, the fact is that there is insufficient knowledge about that whole area. We cannot at present tell the manager how to use social norms as dependent variables.

In relation to problems of choice:

1. In order to apply any of the theoretical notions, the manager must be able to set specific individual goals, tie reward to individual behaviour, and treat his workers equitably.
2. However, many jobs are inter-dependent. People jointly contribute to the task in order that it can be accomplished, and it is often difficult to separate out individual contributions. This is clearly the case, for example, when project teams are operating. Group rewards tied to group behaviour may be an answer, but are likely to create extra problems, in particular in relation to the principle of equity. Staff in colleges have certainly not taken readily to the concept of group responsibility and group rewards. Indeed the whole learning and socialisation process of those who become leaders has been based on a maximisation of individual effort and achievement.
3. In the current period of rapid change in jobs and their occupants, any motivational reward system is likely to respond to the situation of yesterday rather than today, and tomorrow will be different again. Motivation is based on individual behaviour, and if jobs change there is different behaviour to observe and different rewards to administer.

5. WAYS FORWARD

What then are the best ways forward? In terms of theory there are three areas which promise some advance.

Firstly more integrative studies are needed which in particular examine the interactive or additive effects of various approaches. For example, are evaluation apprehension, goal setting and social pressure all likely to have significant effects on motivation, and are they additive as one research paper suggests. (White Mitchell and Bell, 1977).

Secondly there is a need to develop contingency models of motivation. There can be little argument that operant conditioning, goal setting and equity do work. The question now to be answered is under what conditions do they work best. For example if there is a high level of interdependency among jobs in a particular organisation, then social cues and evaluation apprehension may increase as a motivational mechanism while goal setting and operant conditioning become irrelevant, for clearly with interdependence comes mutual awareness and observation. It would be valuable if a line of research aimed to establish when and where different motivational strategies become appropriate.

Thirdly, because an increasing number of jobs are interdependent, group-based and subject to change, more research is needed on the effect of group processes on motivation. Although there is a very considerable body of research on group processes it has not made connections with the research on motivation. The current interest in team building strategies as interventionist techniques is a promising base for such bridging research.

In terms of management practice, most of the answers are still awaited. There are however two basic questions the manager should ask himself - is motivation important for performance: can performance be defined in behavioural terms? If the answer to either or both of these is no, then it is probably not worth his while to worry about motivation systems. If however the answer is yes, then he can ask himself a further series of questions.

Is it possible to observe what people do?

Are there rewards available to be given?

Are the jobs relatively unchanging?

Is the person's behaviour relatively independent of other people's actions?

If the answer to all these questions is affirmative, then the systems and strategies described in this paper are all available to the manager. If the answer to all or any of them is negative, then the manager is stuck. There really is not much the theorists can say to help until they understand better how motivation works in conditions of change, non-observations, and social pressure.

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APPENDIX

Reviews of Motivation Theory

The following books, collections of readings, and review articles provide a comprehensive source of references on motivation.

Books

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